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HEGEL'S IDEALISM AS A CRITIQUE OF DECONSTRUCTIVE PHILOSOPHY

It is common knowledge that deconstructive philosophy fundamentally queries the project of traditional philosophy in general and especially idealism. But in our time we sometimes see that this suspicious attitude, originally intended to keep philosophical thinking alert for the unthought and the contingent, itself turns into a narrow-minded, dogmatic self-evidence. From an arrogant, self-evident position, it disorders and ironizes every philosophical quest for coherence and rational justification. Therefore, a critique of deconstructive philosophy is necessary; what is needed, is a *soupeçon du soupçon*. In this article, I want to examine the conditions of the possibility of this critique. The answer to this question is not as evident as it seems at first sight. From its central notion of radical finiteness, deconstructive philosophy queries the traditional concept of philosophical criticism itself. Conversely, philosophical criticism does not seem to get any hold on this way of philosophizing. Therefore, an alternative mode of philosophical critique needs to be developed, if traditional philosophy wants to enter into a critical dialogue with this way of thinking at all. First, I will focus on the notion of radical finiteness in deconstructive philosophy. Then, I will examine whether Hegel's idealism, more specifically his concept of philosophical critique, offers such an alternative approach to this specific kind of finite thinking. In my analysis of deconstructivism, I take Jacques Derrida as its protagonist.

1. *Deconstructivism as a Thinking of Difference and Deferral*

What has happened to the power of reason in our time that it shapes itself into a fragmented, absolutely finite reason and no longer seems to be capable of unifying these fragments in an all-embracing, meaningful coherence? Why has the faith in the reasonableness of reason lost its credibility? These questions challenge not only idealism, but also every other kind of thinking that looks for coherence and rational justification. In order to take up this challenge, it is first of all necessary to take a closer look at the most prominent form of this fragmented reason, viz. deconstructive thinking, and more specifically the notion of *'difference'*. This notion exemplifies the finiteness of reason and the impossibility of a critical dialogue between one way of thinking and another. In the first place, it implies a radicalization of the familiar concept of difference. From a differential perspective, all thinking and every truth are bound to a (finite) perspective, to a certain time, place, culture, faith, language, and to the structures of thinking itself. Hence, these differences are considered to be absolute, fixed, excluding all mediation. When formulated in this way, the issue of difference does not amount to very much. As such, it is typical for the finite knowledge of understanding popular during the Enlightenment. It is analyzed and criticized by Hegel over and over again. He confronted opposed positions of thinking such as empiricism and rationalism with their own irreconcilability by showing that the terms of the opposition mutually refer to each other and are thus dependent on each other. In that way, they can be superseded in a higher unity, viz. that of reason. But as a reaction to this Hegelian gesture, differential philosophy wants to cut off this resort of dialectical reason. In order to do so, it introduces the notion of difference, as distinguished from opposition. Whereas the terms of an opposition are active in the same field and relate symmetrically to each other, the notion of difference implies their fundamental asymmetry. With regard to the diversity of existing philosophies, this implies that the idea of a common measure and an analogous relation between one way of thinking and another is abandoned. They are not active in the same field; hence, they are incommensurable. Thus, the notion of difference confronts thinking with an impassable boundary, revealing its radical finiteness. It is not capable of explaining its relationship to the other side of this boundary in a rational way. It is an otherness without any positivity. As absolutely finite thinking, it continuously ricochets off this otherness. For differential thinking, the reasonableness of the faith in a reason that looks for rational coherence, unity, and critical dialogue has become highly problematic. From

its perspective, all thinking of totality is a totalitarian, violent thinking, because it repudiates the radicality of difference and usurps radical otherness as a moment of thinking itself. With regard to philosophical critique, the notion of difference implies that a dialogue between one way of thinking and another on the basis of a common standard is impossible.

In the second place, the notion of difference implies a radicalization of deferral. As is pointed out by Heidegger and Derrida, the Latin word *'differentia'* means both difference and deferral. In differential philosophy, deferral refers to the radical openness and indeterminacy of all thinking. Therefore it is also called *'trace'* and *'supplement'*. These words also mean to express (the experience of) a boundary, which cannot be formulated in a conceptual way. The word *'boundary'* points in the direction of an otherness or a being-other, which itself cannot be further determined, which has no positivity at all. Thinking has to dispose of its tendency to determine this otherness; it can only try to articulate this boundary in its purity, that is to say, not as a transition, but as a rupture. Thus, deferral does not refer to fulfillment, trace not to finding what is being traced, and supplement not to the original which it replaces. All these words have lost their usual connotations; they circle around an absolute emptiness, around a radical indeterminacy which refuses every determination by reason. Again, these wordings show that the usual criticism of idealism ricochets off deconstructive philosophy. Differential thinking is not to be caught in the dialectic of determinate negation. The time of removing the deferral, of redeeming the promise has never come, and it does not even come closer; neither is it clear *what* is deferred or promised. In sum, this way of philosophizing is a revolt against all eschatology.

2. *Idealism as Critique*

It is evident that deconstructive philosophy embarrasses idealism. The usual way for idealism to criticize finite thinking by mediating its opposed determinations does not work anymore. Moreover, every dialogue between the two threatens to fail because they speak different languages and start from essentially heterogeneous universes of discourse. Thus, the suspicion arises that idealism is incommensurable with this kind of finite thinking. This is the reason why it is so difficult to bring the critical potential of idealism into action in the philosophical discussion with deconstructivism. In order to avoid a complete deadlock, it is necessary for idealism to find a new approach to finite thinking. In this search, I start from the way in which Hegel deals with the possibility of philosophical critique, more specifically in its confrontation with *'unphilosophy'*. This word is understood to mean a way of thinking that has nothing in common with philosophy as such. In this sense it can serve as an example of the incommensurability mentioned above.

In Hegel's essay *On the Essence of Philosophical Criticism*, the question of the possibility of idealism as a critique plays a central role.¹ Is it possible to elaborate a truly philosophical critique which is more than a subjective expression of approval or disapproval? Hegel brings this issue up when he examines the question how he can judge actually existing philosophical systems from the perspective of his own philosophical project. Roughly speaking, there are two possibilities. In the first place, there may be a fundamental similarity between the critique and the philosophy it aims at. In this case they share, in spite of all their differences, the same basic *'idea of philosophy'*. This implies concretely that they both aim, each in their own way, to express conceptually the essence of philosophy, viz. the absolute. In this situation, the task of philosophical criticism is relatively easy: *'It is the concern of criticism to interpret the way and the degree in which it emerges free and clear, and the range within which it has been elaborated into a scientific system of philosophy'* (GW 4, 119). The absolute serves as an independent standard valid for both. More concretely, Hegel has in mind the way in which the absolute unifies the oppositions of understanding. But there is a second possibility which seriously embarrasses philosophical critique. This occurs when the critique has to establish that the idea of philosophy is completely absent in the way of thinking under examination. From the perspective of the critique, such thinking is an example of *'unphilosophy'* (GW 4, 118-9). In this situation, a mutually recognized, independent standard is out of the question. Philosophy and unphilosophy are incommensurable and any relation between them inevitably breaks down.

In what way does this problem play a role in the contemporary discussion? Of course, there are major differences between Hegel's conception of unphilosophy and deconstructivism. But with regard to the issue

at stake here, namely the asymmetry or incommensurability between idealism and deconstructive thinking, the situation is the same. Therefore, it is important to examine the nature of this asymmetry and its consequences for the possibility of a dialogue between idealism and deconstructivism. The latter thinks against the basic principles of idealism, deconstructs them etc. With this, I refer to the idealist assumption that it makes sense to look for coherence and rational justification. But above all, I have in mind its belief in the reasonableness of reason. For idealism, reason is more than a subjective construction of thinking. It draws its reasonableness from the more encompassing reasonableness of reality itself and tries to formulate this as rationally as possible. By contrast, deconstructive thinking tries to show the absolute particularity and contingency of this assumption. Its notions of difference and deferral indicate that time and again reason misses its ultimate objective, viz. to express the reasonableness of reality. This shows that between idealism and deconstructivism there is ultimately no conformity about the fundamental principles of what philosophy is or should be. Therefore, the intended dialogue between these two ways of thinking seems to fail before it even starts. Formulated in Hegel's own words: »The effort of criticism is entirely wasted on the people and the works that are deprived of the idea of philosophy. In the absence of the idea, criticism gets into the gravest difficulty. For if all criticism is subsumption under the idea, then all criticism must necessarily cease where the idea is lacking. It can have no other direct relationship [to that with which it is concerned] than that of repudiation« (GW 4, 118). It makes no sense to appeal to the idea of philosophy as an independent and universal standard because not only the content of this idea, but also its independence and universality are continuously disordered and deconstructed.

The conclusion of all this is that the relation between these two ways of thinking breaks down if idealism is conceived as a critical judgement of deconstructive thinking on the basis of an independent standard. Even in Hegel's eyes, »there is no immediate escape from this relationship of criticism which cuts unphilosophy off from philosophy« (GW 4, 119). Hence, if idealism is to enter into a critical dialogue with deconstructivism at all, a new and better approach of philosophical criticism than the immediate one analyzed above is required. In his article on the *Essence of philosophical criticism* Hegel explicitly dealt with this question. If philosophy is confronted with unphilosophy, it has to give up its initial pretension of objectivity. »When it wants to maintain a one-sided point of view as valid against others, it becomes partisan polemic« (GW 4, 127). How can this polemic operate in such a way as to be more than a purely subjective repudiation? Is there another, indirect relationship between the two possible than the direct one of repudiation? Hegel's answer is very condensed in this passage. Because both ways of thinking are cut off from each other, »there is for idealism nothing to be done but recount how this negative side expresses itself and confesses its non-being« (GW 4, 119). The partisan character of this critique lies in its negative relation to unphilosophy, in the fact that they have nothing in common. But nevertheless, idealism wants to overcome its immediate character as much as possible. It aims at being more than a completely negative attitude towards this kind of thinking. »A negative attitude would eventually come down again to an overall repudiation, which would be in conflict with the very essence of idealism. Thus, by keeping in touch philosophically with a way of philosophizing that really does not deserve this name, idealism tries to be faithful to its fundamental conviction of rational coherence, and this even against the appearance of the opposite. How can idealism as critique maintain this paradoxical attitude? Eventually only by expressing (Hegel speaks here of »construing«) the negativity of finite thinking itself as completely and systematically as possible. In such a construction, the nullity of finite thinking will come to light by itself. Hegel is convinced that, by following such a procedure, »what is nothing to begin with must unfailingly appear ever more clearly as nothing in its development, until it can be recognized as such by virtually everybody« (GW 4, 119).

What lesson does Hegel's analysis of philosophical critique teach us about a possible dialogue between idealism and deconstructive philosophy? Hegel's suggestion to »construe« this way of thinking in view of its possible nullity may offer a promising perspective. Concretely, this means that idealism closely follows deconstructivism on its track in order to examine where it derails. In this way idealism can examine whether this deregulating thinking deregulates itself. With this remark, I mean the following. As we have seen above, deconstructive thinking tries to undermine the basic assumption of idealism, the metaphysical belief in the reasonableness of reason. To a certain extent, a suspicious attitude is typical for philosophy as such. As radical and critical thinking, every philosophy questions its own presuppositions, including the metaphysical confidence in reason. In this sense, philosophy is always accompanied by the shadow of a radical

distrust. Hegel is no exception to this general attitude. This becomes clear if one looks at the way in which he tries to get in touch with unphilosophy in order to keep the dialogue going. But the essential difference with deconstructivism is that, for idealism, this mistrust does not have the final say. I quote Hegel again: »Belief in the possibility of such an actual cognition, and not just in the negative wandering along or the perennial springing up of new forms, is absolutely necessary if the effect to be expected from a critique of them is to be a true one, that is, not a merely negative destruction of these limited forms, but one that results in a preparation of the way for the arrival of true philosophy« (GW 4, 127).

But deconstructivism precisely points time and again at an emptiness in the heart of idealism. It queries this faith in the reasonableness of reason, calls it a »metaphysical remnant« and tries to think against it. Nevertheless, it is exactly with regard to this important issue, which exposes the core of the asymmetry between idealism and deconstructive thinking and cuts them off from each other radically, that there is a possibility of a dialogue. The issue here is the crucial critical question whether the absoluteness of finitude itself can be thought. Is deconstructive thinking finally able to maintain its claim to think coherently against the faith in reason? In making such a claim, is it not confronted with its own metaphysical remnant, which cannot be derailed, deconstructed? More specifically, the question is whether the faith in the reasonableness of reason is a transcendental presupposition of all thinking.

3. An Idealist Critique of Deconstructivism

At this point, I want to make a contribution to this dialogue. The specific nature of deconstructive thinking can be summarized in the image of the double bind. As a linguistic activity thinking is, on one hand, always an orderly process of determination. And because this process is always presupposed in all thinking being and in every concrete activity of thinking, it is impossible to break away from this process completely. But on the other hand, deconstructivism is struck by the experience that this process of determination has no origin and no end (telos) to which thinking could orientate itself. Hence, all determinations of thinking, as well as the activity of determination itself, seem to be radically contingent and without foundation. In order to do justice to this experience, deconstructive thinking always accompanies the orderly movement of determination with an equally strong countermovement of »unbounding« and »deregulating«.

With regard to the deconstructive thinking of deferral and difference, I will try to deconstruct it from an idealist perspective. More specifically, I will ask whether and where in deconstructive thinking there is a metaphysical (transcendental) remnant. With this question, I do not want to argue that this remnant itself is contingent, thus paving the way for a still more radical kind of finite thinking than deconstructivism. Neither is my point to fix this remnant as a positivity available to thinking and on the basis of which an absolute knowledge could be established once and for all. Pointing at the transcendental character of this remnant is not the same as claiming its univocal determinacy. What is at stake here is to show that insofar as this way of thinking systematically thinks against the metaphysical faith in the reasonableness of reason, it can no longer stand its ground. In order to avoid a complete deadlock, deconstructive thinking tacitly accepts, against its own explicit tendency, some vital metaphysical presuppositions. Hence, the question is whether deconstructivism is really capable of sticking to its own claims of radical contingency, not as a necessary suspicion behind all serious metaphysical inquiry, but as a position from which all thinking can be deregulated. Does it not deregulate itself in this deregulation? Is it really true that, in this double bind, construction and deconstruction, movement and countermovement, determination and unbending, presence and deferral are as equivalent as deconstructive thinking thinks them to be? I will show that the answer to these questions points in the direction of the hidden metaphysical remnant of this thinking.

These questions and problems become apparent when we study in more detail the manifest critical claims of deconstructivism itself. With its notions of deferral and difference, finite thinking undermines the metaphysical presuppositions of classical metaphysics and especially idealism. A very specific way of criticizing is meant here. Of course, deconstructive thinking cannot appeal to an independent, universally accepted standard because this would imply a backsliding into metaphysics. Therefore, criticism assumes the form of deconstruction. In this way, it shows that metaphysics as a justificational and foundational thinking always rests on contingent decisions and beliefs, in short on all kinds of unstable constructions of thinking.

Hence, it points out that every attempt to lay a foundation and every belief in reason are only possible themselves against the background or on the basis of radical finitude and contingency.

But one can ask whether deconstructive philosophy does not have a hidden agenda behind its deconstructions. By asking this, idealism reverses the criticism of deconstructivism and turns it against this very way of thinking. It queries the self-evident character of the radical contingency of all thinking. Idealism asks whether the critical aims of deconstructive thinking do not reach farther than can be accepted on deconstructive terms. Insofar as deconstruction really wants to be critical, it inevitably goes beyond its own finiteness. With this I mean the following. Strictly speaking, deconstruction only shows that human reason is a construction without a solid foundation. Thus, deconstructive philosophy liberates thinking from the constraint exercised by the absolute truth claims of traditional metaphysics. Formulated positively, deconstructivism clears the way for other kinds of thinking more poetic or narrative, less foundational. But then the question crops up whether this conclusion does meet the critical ambitions of deconstructive thinking. What remains of the critique as critique? To what extent is idealism, as a pre-eminent form of metaphysics, really affected by this criticism? Why should it be bothered by it at all? If all kinds of thinking are equally contingent, then there is for idealism hardly any reason to be worried about the criticism of deconstructive thinking. If the criticism itself is a purely contingent expression of thinking, it loses its coercive character and can be put aside easily as polemics and partiality. The assurance that things *can* be thought otherwise is at the most an interesting message. It only gains a critical potential if it is proven that things *must* be thought otherwise. But deconstructive thinking can never offer this proof of the necessity to think otherwise because this would run counter to its own claim of the radical finiteness of thinking. Moreover, seen from this point of view, the choice for one way of thinking or another loses its pertinent character; it becomes itself a contingent option, one dependent on personal taste, power etc. If all ways of thinking are finite, contingent, they can easily withdraw and reject each other. The critical discussion between them then has come to an end. This shows that deconstructive thinking, at least if it wants to maintain its radical finiteness, cannot fulfill its own critical claims. Paradoxically, it thus ends up in the same deadlock as does Hegel in his criticism of unphilosophy, as I have shown above. If every standard of philosophical criticism is lacking, this implies the end of criticism itself.

But it is clear that deconstructive thinking does not want to give up its critical claims at all. This way of thinking continuously conveys the impression that it wants to do more than just prepare *another* kind of thinking. It insinuates that this other way of thinking is not only different, but also better, more appropriate to express the radical contingency of reality. But notions like >more< and >better< presuppose that this thinking implicitly appeals to an originality to which it seemingly has a privileged relation. Similarly, notions such as deferral, difference etc. are introduced to conceptualize a better, more original relation of thinking to absolute contingency than presence and identity for example. But in this way, finite thinking refers beyond its own finiteness. It yields to the temptation to upgrade the idea that it is possible to think in another way to the conviction that it is necessary to think otherwise. But by doing so it deregulates itself as absolutely finite thinking: this necessity destroys the absolute radicality of contingency. In sum, deconstructive thinking cannot be at the same time radically finite and radically critical. Insofar as it is a critical thinking, it makes an appeal to a transcendental moment and thus deregulates its own deregulations.

4. Conclusion

The issue at stake was to think about the question whether idealism could be interpreted as a criticism of deconstructive thinking. More specifically, the question was whether the latter succeeds in thinking against the metaphysical belief in the reasonableness of reason. Does differential thinking finally do justice to its principle of the absolute contingency of truth, or is there an inevitable metaphysical remnant which cannot be deconstructed? My analysis of the manifest critical ambitions of this way of thinking has revealed a transcendental moment presupposed in every kind of critical thinking. This transcendental moment implies that all critique appeals implicitly or explicitly to a necessity reaching beyond contingency. This means that not everything is a construction of reason or language. Reason expresses a rationality which is both internal and external to itself and thus one which gives to criticism its critical content.

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NOTE

- 1 G.W.F. HEGEL, »Über das Wesen der philosophischen Kritik überhaupt, und ihr Verhältnis zum gegenwärtigen Zustand der Philosophie insbesondere«, in: G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 4., Hamburg, 1968. Henceforth I will refer to this work in the main text as: *GW* 4.